



Improved Findability Leads to Positive Top Line Impact



WHITE PAPER

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Best Practices for Increasing Online Conversions

Companies following a business-to-consumer model face a challenge in improving and protecting their top line growth - the economic downturn with its effect of constricting cash flow, the rise of generation Y with their shorter attention spans and the near ubiquitous information access due to the commoditization of technology all contribute to the bleak scenario and is true for all but the niche markets. It is becoming very important to be found on the web by users searching for services, goods, products which you provide, it is becoming important that once these users come to your site they be able to make decisions quickly and effectively and that they be able to then act as promoters and recommend your services, products or goods to their friends and family. Falter on any of these steps and you stand to lose to your competition.

Opening the Floodgates

IDC published very interesting research in 2006¹ which classified sites on the internet as being either Gateways, Hubs or Nodes. Google, Bing and Yahoo are examples of Gateways; Amazon, confused.com and timesshopping.com represent Hubs; all others being the Nodes. Nodes are special because they have few outward connections and the node site is the originator of the content being presented on it. Most companies in the B2C space own at least one such node on which they are heavily dependent to attract new customers. To ensure that your node site, which is where you conduct your primary business, attracts visitors, you need to invest in a methodology called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). SEO focuses on leveraging gateways and hubs to drive users to your site. SEO is a design methodology - design your online strategy, design your content, design your technical implementation.

Online Strategy

Brand identification is key to being able to sell - as any marketer will tell you. The same holds true for the online world. It is extremely important for companies to understand what their brand, their product, their services mean to their customers - there are many retail banks, life insurance policies, mp3 players, 4-door sedans, refrigerators, muscle relaxant creams, but, what is your unique selling point (USP)? Why should you be selected out of the other products in the market? Figuring this out is the realm of marketing specialists, but with the web there is a new twist to an already difficult problem - you need to rephrase your USPs in simple terms which everyday people use. This is generally more difficult than defining a couple of bullet points which make up the products USPs requiring skills in linguistic analysis possessed by few. For the online strategy each brand, product, service needs to be associated to a taxonomy - a set of words, phrases, concepts, which must be, should be, could be used to describe the item which you are trying to sell. A challenge in creating the taxonomy is that the terms included need to be aligned with the verbiage used on the web for the particular country, region, language and most importantly for the market segment you are trying to attract - it needs to be localized, customized, personalized to be effective. Once this taxonomy is created, it should be used to optimize the

content on the site, to ensure that the content is consistent with the words, phrases and concepts which have been selected to represent the item being offered. Most search engines use a page rank algorithm to sort the search results. This algorithm, first popularized by Google, considers the number of backlinks to a page while establishing its rank. So the greater the number of links pointing back at your page, the higher its ranking in the search result. Of course there are variations to this theme amongst the engines, but the general principle remains the same. To maximize the ranking of your pages, it becomes important that external sites (i.e. gateways and hubs) point to your pages. Depending on the product you are trying to sell there are options ranging from the good old link exchange, to the more web 2.0 focussed blogs which can be considered to increase the number of backlinks. This too must be considered whilst formulating the online strategy.

Content Design

It is the content presented, which is used by the search engines to index the site. Hence it is of extreme importance that the words, phrases and concepts used, are consistent and well presented. In many cases we have seen that whilst the online strategy and technology are focussed on during an SEO exercise, the content is left to languish. This is a short-sighted approach and will lead to poor ROI. If there is a content issue - the only solution is to fix the content.

Some strategies and tools deployed at an early stage can save a lot of angst:

1. Create the taxonomy early, share it with the content team and train them on its usage
2. Use tools and audits to check the link consistency within the site - a word, phrase, concept should consistently link back to a single page
3. Use tools and audits to check the linguistic profile of the site - this too needs to be compared with the linguistic profile of the target audience and deviations need to be addressed

Technology Design

Technology choices themselves contribute to some of the findability ills due to their various limitations. It is important to understand that SEO, if done right, has an impact on the back-office/content authoring as well as the front-office/portal/site implementations and deployment. SEO inputs impact everything from user interface design to metadata design to server topology, so if there has to be post-production fixing it is generally invasive and non-trivial. Thus it is important to involve an SEO expert early to ensure that costly fixing can be avoided.

Alternate Information Strategies

Besides publishing information on your site, a strong YouTube and Twitter strategy provides companies with an edge over their competition. Dell's twitter strategy earned the company USD 1 million in direct sales due to special twitter promotions. Nike, Ford, HomeDepot and University of Phoenix have all harnessed YouTube to promote their brands amongst the general populace, though direct benefits are not documented, there is a definite brand awareness that these companies have created amongst the younger users.



Figure 1: The HomeDepot YouTube channel - effective use of alternate information publishing to drive traffic.

Paid Links

Another option to increase the number of visitors to your site is "paid links". All the major search engines provide for paid links on a result page. Google Adwords, Yahoo SM and MSN's adCenter are the top 3 paid links networks, with Google Adwords being the clear market leader. An entire set of services around paid links are offered by niche vendors, the competition and claims in this space are similar to space selling in the traditional media.

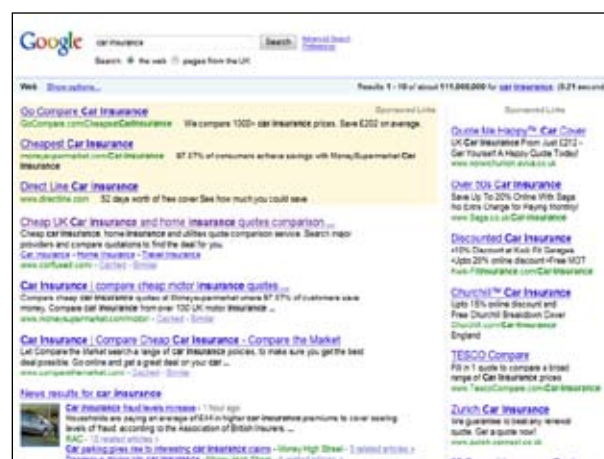


Figure 2: Comparing SEO v/s Paid Link

However, a bit of understanding and research can optimize the spend on paid links. To illustrate this let us consider the search term "car insurance" - searched in the UK about 6 million times in June 2009. The keyword costs £14 per click. Research suggests that the number 1 ranking link in the search result gets 35% of the clickthrus (with adwords present)². Which means that "confused.com" would have gotten about 2 million clickthrus, translating into a £28 million adword spend. It is highly unlikely that confused.com is ever going to allocate such a budget to a single search term, they have spent it wisely on creating compelling content and an effective SEO program to derive immense benefit.

² [Google Ranking and CTR - how clicks distribute over different rankings on Google](#). SEO Scientist, 12-July-2009

From Intent to Action

Now that you have the attention of the “surfer” - s/he has clicked on your link in the search results, listing of a gateway site and has navigated to your site, it is important to ensure that s/he is able to find the right information which is needed by her/him to take the desired action - order the product, item, service. If you do not pay attention to improving the findability on your site, then all the effort put in to getting the user to click on your site in the result listing goes to waste, because after a couple of clicks the user simply will perform another search on Google, MSN, Yahoo or any of the other gateways s/he is using and land up with your competitor. Again like with SEO, site findability impacts all aspects of your web presence - tool selection, content authoring, user interface and the overall user experience.

User Interface Patterns

While the definition of right/actionable information is very dependent on the individual user and the product, item or service being sold, it is important that this information is easily found. In an earlier paper I introduced the Finder and the Social patterns for these user interfaces³ which have been implemented to sell anything from books to holidays to insurance and enable companies to achieve high conversion ratios.

The Finder Pattern

The search result is enhanced with findability aids such as facets, filters, navigators and clusters. These are based on explicit metadata, extracted entities, linguistically processed information and allow the user to narrow the results, broaden the scope or even transform the original query to something different - more useful, more intuitive, more actionable.



Figure 3: Lenovo’s effective usage of the Finder pattern provide an easy means of converting intent into action.

The Social Pattern

As market pressures push towards wider adoption of the web 2.0 ideals - enabling customer created content such as feedback and ranking, repurposing usage information to provide collective intelligence, harnessing user created lists and social networks, it will necessitate a revamp of the search interface. Many of the early adopters have already seen huge successes with the implementation of the social interface pattern - the ability to provide users with more actionable information, information which is provided by other users of the product and therefore have firsthand experience with the product.



Figure 4: Reevo uses the Social pattern to provide users with actionable information.

There are regulatory and legal concerns amongst the financial institutions on adopting web 2.0, however, early adopters like Wells Fargo and Bank of America have already started down this path with blogs, secondlife avatars and iPhone applications reaping huge first-mover benefits in their local markets. Wells Fargo used the collective feedback to redesign their home page and saw the conversion ratio jump up by 50% very soon after the launch⁴.



Figure 5: Wells Fargo’s revamped homepage has increased conversions.

4 | ³ The Enterprise Search Primer, MphasiS, 2008.

⁴ Wells 2.0, Visible Banking, 11-June-2007.

The Power of Word of Mouth

In a recent Harvard Business Review article Noah Goldstein published his research on the effects of social pressure on behaviour of individuals⁶. What is interesting is that this “Peer Pressure Marketing” is the essence of what drives web 2.0 based sales. Blogging, social bookmarking and lists allow users to create content which is directly linked to content on your site. This increases the social profile of your site. Such user actions have a positive effect on your sites search ranking, one of the important rank parameters is the number of external links pointing to your site. So enhancing your site with simple tools such as permalinks and social tool widgets, which promote such linkage are a very cost effective way of increasing the reach of your message and driving more traffic to your site.



Figure 8: HP provides simple tools to promote word-of-mouth.

Conclusion

There is a well know concept in marketing - AIDA - Attention, Intent, Desire, Action - which when adequately supported will lead to direct top line growth. When the company is looking at improving the top line via the online channel, it is important to realize the perils of this channel - most users are young and restless, and have access to immense amounts of information. To ensure that you have their attention it is important to invest in an effective and continuous SEO strategy, to explore the

usage of alternative information channels, to harness the power of blogs, social bookmarks and lists. Should they navigate to your site they clearly have intent to pursue a meaningful interaction with you. Now it becomes extremely important to provide the right interfaces so that the user can easily find the information, product, service they desire - this might be with a redesign of the interface like Wells Fargo, by providing a Finder or Social interface, by providing suggestions, by providing information that can lead to serendipitous discovery. Once the user has reached the object they desire, it is important to make the actual act of placing the order as simple as possible.

Thus an end-to-end, contiguous and continuous Findability effort is of extreme importance - focus on just SEO or on site search or word-of-mouth and it will disrupt the smooth user experience leading to poor conversion ratios. Get in the Findability experts early and let them support your organizations top line aspirations.

Suggested Reading

Ledford, J. L. (2007). SEO: Search Engine Optimization Bible. Wiley.

Morville, P. (2005). Ambient Findability: What We Find Changes Who We Become. O'Reilly Media, Inc.

Scott, D. M. (2008). The New Rules of Marketing and PR: How to Use News Releases, Blogs, Podcasting, Viral Marketing and Online Media to Reach Buyers Directly, Wiley.

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